



The Aristotle

A Canadian High School Philosophy Essay Contest

– A Guide to Writing a Philosophy Essay –

Your entry to the Aristotle Contest will be evaluated according to the following criteria: quality and depth of thought, organization of ideas, and clarity of expression. This guide will help you meet these criteria in the writing of your essay. There are four steps to writing a good essay: reading, thinking, organizing your thoughts, and writing them up.

1. Reading

The only reading you are expected to do for this contest is that given with the question; you are not expected nor encouraged to do any further reading or research. However, if you do use ideas from other sources you will not be penalized (nor rewarded) provided they are properly referenced. Indeed, any ideas that you use from other sources, including the assigned reading(s), must be referenced.

For some questions, the given reading may be a paragraph or two. In these cases, the reading acts to set up or frame the question and all you have to do for this step is to make sure that you understand the question.

If, however, the reading (or readings) assigned for your question is more than two paragraphs, then you need to pay more careful attention to it. The reading will have important ideas that need to be considered in answering the question. This means going over the reading at least two or three times and carefully making sure you understand both it and its relevance to the question. You should ask yourself if any of the arguments in the reading help support or threaten your own response to the question. As you examine the reading, you might want to try sketching any arguments in it in order to clarify what is being argued and how it is being argued for. Note to yourself whether you agree or disagree with the author and, more importantly, why you feel this way. What are your reasons for your attitudes towards the author's arguments? If you agree with everything the author says, then your task will be to add arguments and insights of your own in response to the question.

Note: For those questions that have more than one or two paragraphs of assigned reading, you will, in part, be evaluated on how well you have considered the ideas in the reading that are relevant to your response — especially those ideas that either help or undermine your response.

2. Thinking

The outcome of your reflections on your chosen question, and any readings relevant to it, should be a thesis — an answer to the question that involves your taking a stand on the issues it raises. You should be able to encapsulate your thesis in a thesis statement, a sentence of the form “In this essay, I will argue that [your thesis here].” You have not yet formulated a thesis if you say something uncontroversial, something that anyone who has done the readings could say. Your thesis has to put forward your own particular perspective on the relevant issue in such a way that you will have to defend it against those who might disagree with you.

Here is an example of a thesis statement on a question asking about the moral significance of adoption: “I will argue that an infertile couple that refuses to adopt because they do not want to raise children biologically unrelated to them misunderstands the moral importance of parenthood; it is important because it commits you to helping another member of the human species become a person, not because it involves your reproducing elements of your own distinctive biological nature.” Notice that this claim is controversial; some people might think that there is something morally relevant about the fact that our children are (usually) biologically related to us. The author of this claim owes us an argument in favour of her or his position.

But this is not a thesis statement: “I will argue in what follows that Mary Anne Warren supports the moral right to abortion.” Anyone who reads Warren’s argument already knows that this is her position. The statement simply describes for us a point from the reading; it does not articulate the author’s own distinctive view on the matter.

In coming up with a thesis, a starting point for your reflections might be your initial reactions to the issue in the assigned question. But before these sorts of feelings can be formulated into a thesis, you must investigate what lies behind them. What reasons do you have for your reactions? Why should people who have different reactions from yours take your view seriously? What could you appeal to in an attempt to convince them to agree with you? Asking these questions may force you to reformulate your initial reactions. Eventually, your thinking should lead you not only to a thesis, but also to an argument in support of the thesis.

It should be clear from all this that coming up with a strong thesis (and its supporting argument) takes a good deal of time. The key to the process is reflection. Carefully and critically examine your first reactions to the issues raised by the assigned readings (if any) and the question, rather than making up your mind right away. Don’t rush it: a hastily formulated thesis is usually a weak thesis.

The thesis is the crux of your essay when it comes to evaluation. If the marker cannot discern what your thesis is, or why you hold it, you will likely get a low evaluation (Level 1). An essay with a thesis and a weak or incomplete argument will likely be in the low to middle range (Level 2). An essay with a thesis and a strong, well-rounded, original argument is likely to get a high evaluation (Level 3 or 4), provided that other components of the essay (organization of ideas and clarity of expression) are strong as well.

Note: The quality and depth of thought is the most substantive part of the evaluation of your essay.

3. Organizing your thoughts

You now know what your thesis is. How are you going to present it in such a way that someone who doesn’t initially agree with you will come to see things your way? You will have to lead him or her step by step through an argument that supports your claim. At this point you should make a point-form outline of your essay, indicating what you plan to do at each stage of it.

Your introduction should motivate the question, explaining to the readers why they should care about it. Assume your readers are intelligent people who have some awareness of the issues, but who do not know what question you have chosen for your essay — this means you have to explain to them what you will try to do in your essay and why. Your introduction should include your thesis statement! Let the reader know by the end of the first paragraph what you plan to do in the essay. This is absolutely crucial. There is no reason to hide your intentions until later in the essay; surprise is not a virtue in philosophical prose.

In developing your argument, consider how someone might object to your thesis. How do you respond to these objections? Think about what your thesis commits you to on issues related to those that are the topic of the essay. Are you willing to embrace those commitments? If not, why should the reader accept your thesis?

Conclude your essay with a brief summary of what you have taken yourself to have accomplished in the essay.

Note: The logical organization of ideas is critical to effective communication.

4. Writing up your thoughts

You have an outline of the essay. Now you must write it all out in careful, clear, concise English prose. Aim for a slightly formal conversational tone. Grammatical or spelling errors are, of course, unacceptable. They detract from the essay's argument, and sometimes make it hard for the reader to understand what the author is trying to say.

There is no need to shy away from using the first person when it is needed. You certainly can say: "I will argue in what follows that..." or "One objection to my view might be"

Use the present tense when describing the views of a philosopher, living or dead: "Descartes thinks that..." or "Warren argues"

Give references whenever you directly quote someone. But you also must give references whenever you borrow someone else's ideas or describe her or his view, even if you do not quote directly. Failure to reference someone else's ideas is plagiarism and will result in complete disqualification.

Write several drafts of the essay (minimum: 3). Even though the reading-thinking-organizing-writing steps have been described as if they are always undertaken sequentially, in fact you may not have a clear idea of what your thesis is until you have tried to write a draft of the essay. In this case, the writing of the draft counts as part of step 2, "Thinking." Once you have your thesis you still need to go on to the other steps of organizing your thoughts and writing them up clearly. And this means that you need to write another draft. Often it is more helpful to start the new draft from scratch, rather than simply to edit your initial run-through of the material.

Once you have what you take to be a close-to-final draft, share it with some friends to see if they can follow your thoughts (you should include a footnote thanking them for their help with the essay); listen to their suggestions! When we write up our own ideas we often take for granted things that our readers might not find quite so obvious.

Note: PROOFREAD! There should be no grammatical or spelling errors in your final draft. All the sentences should be clear; none of your constructions should be awkward or hard to follow. In attempting to catch these problems it often helps to read your essay aloud.

5. One final note

It is hard to write a clear, concise, interesting essay. Writing is never easy. Be prepared to work at it! A successful result, however, can be most satisfying. Good luck!